

The most strategic partner

Vol. 4, No. 121, July 6, 1998

Today Poland remains one of the few states that not only declare but do their best to enhance their strategic partnership with Ukraine. Although Ukraine's strategic partners are numerous, they have little in common except the declared fact of strategic partnership. Following the statements of President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma, they are many and various: Russia and the United States (according to President Kuchma's repeated assurances), Uzbekistan (announced to be a strategic partner by Kuchma on November 11, 1995), and "multipartisan" China (Leonid Kuchma's statement of March 29, 1996), and Japan (Leonid Kuchma's statement of December 30, 1996).

Meanwhile, the President of Ukraine gave Great Britain, Argentina and the Netherlands only the status of "special partners. Only once - on January 12, 1996 - President Kuchma dropped the "strategic" perspective and referred to Poland simply as to a "special partner". Probably, it was just a slip of the tongue, as the Ukrainian-Polish relations may be regarded as an example of the strategic partnership Ukraine needs.

Polish President Aleksandr Kwasniewsky's visit to Ukraine - the fourth since January 1998 - does not demand any special summing up, as well as multiple other routine instances of the Polish-Ukrainian relations like the production of a Polish "Bizon" tractors by the Kharkiv-based Malyshev plant or Polish specialists' acquaintance with the Kharkiv Aircraft plant's production cycle. The two Presidents' visit to the place in the vicinity of Kharkiv where political prisoners and Polish officers and soldiers were shot in 1940 and the joint act of placing the first stone to the basement of a memorial to victims of totalitarianism are the parts of the historic peace-making started by the Ukrainian-Polish Declaration on Reconciliation and Cooperation signed on May 21, 1998. The two leaders participated in the ceremony of putting flowers to the Polish graves at the Lychakivske cemetery in Lviv and opened the plaque in Jaworzno at the place where Ukrainian victims of the Visla operation died in the concentration camp. There may be other actions to settle the mutual grievances associated in the two peoples' consciousness with Przemyśl and Helm, Volyn and Kharkiv. The policy, the aim of which was clearly formulated by President Kwasniewsky as "building bridges of understanding, closing down very complicated problems that have lasted for years [and] centuries", will continue as long as the two states need it.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Borys Tarasiuk once said he shared Zbigniew Brzezinski's view that France and Germany had made the after-war Western Europe and acted as catalysts of the unification. Tarasiuk also added that "developing the analogy, one may say that Ukraine and Poland can do in central and Eastern Europe what was once done by France and Germany." Taking into account the fact that President Kwasniewsky has repeatedly stressed publicly that "not a single month passes without our meeting with President Kuchma" one may conclude that the French-German relations were chosen as a model for the Ukrainian-Polish ones: the burden of historic grievances is similarly heavy, therefore, the French and German leaders had to meet very often, even more often than every month.

Aleksandr Kwasniewsky's visit to Ukraine in June 1998 is yet another episode in the development of the Ukrainian-Polish relations which have been marked by a number of achievements, including Ukraine's cooperation with the Vizegrad Three (later transformed into the Vizegrad Four), involvement in the Central European Initiative and the Polish leaders' multiple statements that their country supports Ukraine in the issues of cooperation with, and future membership of the EU. The developing understanding includes the Ukrainian President's statements that Ukraine and Poland "view NATO not as a defence union, but as a collective security mechanism that unites democratic states", and activities of the Presidential Polish-Ukrainian Consultative Committee, and consultations of the Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defence Council with heads of the Polish National Security Agency.

Success of the Ukrainian-Polish relations is manifested in the statement, made by President Kuchma at the meetings with heads of diplomatic missions in January 1998, that "joint statements of Presidents of Poland and Ukraine" were among "the most important foreign policy events of 1997" together with the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership with the Russian Federation, the Treaty of Cooperation with Romania and the border agreements with Belarus. No other state leader of a new Eastern European democracy has made as radical statement in support of Ukraine as the one made by

President Kwasniewsky in Helsinki in May 1998: the West should be more determined in assisting Ukraine, as the price of the West's unwillingness to open up its purse may be instability in a country with 52 million inhabitants. He argued that in the case of Ukraine the funds are needed to ensure the "initial leap" and added that the risk is too high.

Also important are the developments of the Ukrainian-Polish relations outside the official policy framework. All public initiatives carried out by representatives of the two countries - like the almost forgotten initiative of the Ukrainian Republican Party, numerous Polish-Ukrainian fora and the participation of the Social Democratic Party of Ukraine in the International Committee for Protection of Democracy in Belarus together with Belarusian, Swedish, German, Austrian and Polish Social Democrats - represent normal relations of two states that cooperate on the levels of state leaders, parties, the media and business communities and individuals. The general picture is made complete by incidents like reproduction by the extreme right Polish newspaper "Dziennik Katolicki" of an appeal "To Peoples, Parliaments, Governments of Ukraine, Belarus, Israel, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Yugoslavia" issued by a group of Ukrainian MPs and signed by Communist leader P. Symonenko, V. Cherepkov, H. Dolzhenko and E. Marmazov. The "appeal" warned of "fascism in Ukraine", "reconstruction and strengthening of national-fascist organizations", "heroisation of terrible crimes". Other details of the partnership include consultancy offered by Director General of the United Energy Systems of Ukraine (UESU) Hennady Tymoshenko to Polish Minister of Oil Industry, according to Tymoshenko's own statement in the press in May 1997.

Aleksandr Kwasniewsky's visit is a reason to analyze the current status of the Ukrainian-Polish relations. Zbigniew Brzezinski's view that if Central Europe had to choose between joining NATO in conditions of Ukraine's subordination to Moscow or staying out of NATO provided Ukraine remained independent, the second option would be more secure, apparently, is shared by many Poles, who cooperate with Americans in the strategic triangle USA-Poland-Ukraine. Like no other Central or Eastern European state, Poland coordinates its activities with the United States. However, today Poles are facing the need to combine their new commitments that will follow their country's membership in the EU with repeated promises to Ukraine that Poland's movement to Europe will not have a negative effect on Ukraine's interests.

In March 1998, President Kwasniewsky announced that "after Poland joins the EU, no new dividing line will emerge at the Ukrainian-Polish border". However, the EU demands that the border be closed and visas be introduced for travellers from the East; therefore, Poles, while insisting there will be no new "iron curtain" but a "friendly border" are prepared to obey. Until it is clear how Poland plans to maintain the current status of the Ukrainian-Polish border and avoid criticism of the EU, it is important to remember the words President Kuchma said in May 1998: "If the joint search for solutions of this complex, acute and sensitive problem is not begun today, it may seriously slow down development of ties between our countries." The best - though unrealistic now - solution that would suit both parties would be Ukraine's associate membership in the European Union - the goal declared by the Ukrainian Foreign Minister and then the Prime Minister, and supported by statements of the Polish President. However, then it is unclear how Ukraine intends to introduce visa arrangements with Russia and Belarus, but that is not the issue of Ukrainian-Polish relations.

It is also important to note that Ukraine's international reputation is not as high as Poland's although Ukraine and Poland compete for importance in views of Western politicians and the media. Poland, apparently, is concerned about Ukraine's reputation. Kwasniewsky's Helsinki statement went on as follows: one may agree to the view of financiers that before investments pour into a country it should demonstrate commitment to reforms. The formulation suggests that the Polish President, while insisting on Western assistance to Ukraine in May 1998, did not see Ukraine as committed to reforms. His matter-of-factly words that "probably, we have no more than five minutes to risk once more" is not the most flattering reference to Ukraine as a country that should be rescued with substantial risk five minutes before its collapse.

Poland is much more tolerant to the troubled reform process in Ukraine possibly because they had some hard experience themselves. According to Ukrainian Ambassador to Poland Petro Sardarchuk, Poland is among Ukraine's top three trading partners. About 200 Ukrainian-Polish joint ventures work in Poland, and about 700 in Ukraine. Probably, that is the reason why Aleksandr Kwasniewsky confined himself to admitting "some difficulties". In May 1997, ex-Prime Minister of Poland Włodzisław Cimoszewicz spoke about Poland's intention to provide Ukraine with a ECU 20 million

technical assistance loan and described difficulties connected to that: "... we reminded about this offer several times, but the Ukrainian party did not respond. This makes us uncomfortable: we do not know how to view this silence. Either our partners are not interested in the offer or there are some other reasons?" However, compared to statements of American and Western European politicians the Polish leaders' comments sound amiable and indulgent.

Obviously, Ukraine and Poland do differ in their perspectives on some strategic issues, like the situation with the planned Russian gas pipeline - alternative to the one currently going through Ukraine - that would go through Belarus. Each of the countries has its own national interests. However, Poland does not exaggerate the problem of Ukrainian illegal migrants, nor the problem of Ukrainian crime, like Ukrainians do not blow up the issue of the would-be Russian-Polish "gas pipe".

The consistency of Polish policy towards Ukraine has an important explanation: the Polish political elite and the society display consensus on foreign policy issues, policy towards Ukraine included. For instance, the suggestion of chairman of the Interparliamentary Polish-Ukrainian Commission, member of the Sejm's Commission for Foreign Affairs Bohdan Borusevych following the dissolution of the Belarusian parliament by Aleksandr Lukashenka that President of Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania could act as intermediaries in the conflict found understanding of the Polish president. Leszek Balcerowicz, leader of the Unia Wolnosci, the only political parties that included a representative of ethnic Ukrainians, Mirosław Czech, in its election list, supports the Polish government's intention to re-orient their interests from Russia to Ukraine. Before the 1998 parliamentary elections in Ukraine one of major Polish newspapers expressed concern that the election involved "a threat that the pro-European and close to Poland team will be removed from power". It is hardly possible now in Ukraine, where some parliamentary leaders advocate not only foreign policy changes, but go further and suggest establishing a Special Slavic Corps in the Crimea. Polish left-wingers, including Kwasniewski himself, are first of all "Polish", and only after that "left-wingers". This should be understood in Ukraine by those who regarded the "left march" in Europe and in Poland as a hope for restoration of the Economic Cooperation Union if not the Warsaw Pact. Oleksandr Moroz who claims to be consistent in his views argued on November 20, 1995, that "the victory of a representative of the left forces at the presidential elections in Poland is a natural process", must admit the continuity of Lech Wałęsa's and Aleksandr Kwasniewski's foreign policy. Otherwise Mr. Moroz will look like Communist leader Petro Symonenko who kept asking President Kwasniewski how much Poland had lost on the collapse of the Economic Cooperation Union and never understood the Polish President's answer about how much it had gained from integration into European structures.

Probably, there is some hidden symbolism in the fact that Presidents of Ukraine and Poland commemorated victims of totalitarianism near Kharkiv, a city where father of Zbigniew Brzezinski - viewed with good reasons as an architect of Polish policy towards Ukraine - was the Consul of Rzech Pospolyta during the years of "Jezhovshchina". Fates of politicians and fates of peoples meet. The point is that there must be other symbols of achievements and success, without "difficulties" and "silence", where "real reforms" will substitute "readiness for reforms". Symbols must fit the notion of strategic partnership and the Declaration of reconciliation and Cooperation.

P.S. In May 1993, prominent Polish reformer Leszek Balcerowicz strongly refused the offer to work in the Ukrainian government after Leonid Kuchma, then Prime Minister of Ukraine, invited him to become his adviser. According to a Ukrainian information agency, head of the group of the Polish Prime Minister's advisers Marek Dombrowski said that Balcerowicz had explained his refusal by two reasons: the lack of purpose in the Kuchma government and the lack of any radical changes in the Ukrainian society. It looks like a similar offer, made to Balcerowicz by the current Ukrainian government, would also be rejected: the leader of the Unia Wolnosci has a lot of his own things to do. Though, he would probably repeat his reference to the purpose and changes.